Introduction: A reader, the empowered leader - Examining the challenges

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Background

The collection of papers in this special issue of PULA is a small sample of the proceedings of the *Pan-African Reading-for-All* conference whose theme was *'A reader, the empowered leader'*. At the conference, leadership was conceptualized as implying the individual's active participation in a community's literacy practices. Rather than using literacy to lead others in a literal sense, the literate individual leads an improved life by using literacy to understand his/her everyday existence.. The literate individual is empowered to understand, develop, and apply the skills, values and attitudes that are deemed valuable in the community. At the community level, empowerment links literacy to issues of "citizenship, cultural identity, socio-economic development, human rights and equity" (UNESCO 2004:7), and helps to "transform the lives of entire communities served by a nucleus of committed new literates[…] thus fructifying local knowledge and the employment of local languages" (Easton 1998:1). In the face of new technologies, literate individuals are also 'multi-literate' (Kasper 2000) in several ICT literacies. The conference reflected on all these issues. Similarly, as we approach the target date of 2015, set by the UN for the actualization of Education for All (EFA) (UN Report 2007), the conference presentations echoed the goal of EFA as an integral part of Literacy-for-All and Reading-for-All. The conference theme therefore attempted to take

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stock of the in and out-of-school literacy activities organized for the African child and youth. In the over 100 conference papers presented, speakers reported on how individuals and groups were experiencing new knowledge, and acquiring new skills and attitudes as a consequence of formal or informal literacy practices. Unfortunately, only seven of these presentations found space in this special issue. The seven papers were selected because they deal with the efforts and challenges related to literacy in different contexts. We hope that in documenting these efforts and challenges, we offer shared experiences for others to improve their own literacy practices.

The *Pan-African Reading for All* conference, which is held every two years, is an important literacy event on the African continent as it provides a platform for policy makers in government and the donor community to interact with literacy professionals and researchers at all levels, and share vital knowledge, experiences, and information on appropriate ways and strategies of delivering literacy to all communities. The purpose of the conference is to develop ways to translate 'Education for All' into 'Reading for All'. In the six African countries where the conference has been held since 1999, the positive developments registered include the growth and development of community libraries, adult literacy classes, children's reading tents, the emergence of reading and writing clubs in schools and communities, and positive policy pronouncements in favour of the book sector and publishing industry. The seven papers echo some of the concerns, developments, challenges and successes of literacy campaigns.

Using action research, Cramer, Moduto, Ntobong, and Randa collected data from a rural primary school in South Africa and examined the creative writings of Grades 5 and 6 students. Their paper, titled "Engaging learners with literacy through a creative writing programme in rural South Africa," reports that student writing improved in the areas of creativity, developing text, and writing a cohesive text as a result of the school programme that put greater emphasis on literacy as part of the *Foundations for Learning* campaign. The programme also aimed at encouraging children to read authentic texts and engage in the writing process. However, they report that the programme was not effective in improving grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation and did not meet the needs of struggling writers. It was found that when learners have the opportunity to write, they utilize their background knowledge

from other texts and media as well as their experiences to create texts that are expressive and follow the conventions of various genres.

In the paper, "What methodologies do universal basic education teachers use in teaching reading in Benue State, Nigeria?", Muodumogu reports on the results of an investigation into the reading methodologies 163 teachers used, the reading skills they developed, the teaching and assessment strategies they adopted in the teaching of reading, and the criteria they used in recommending reading materials. Arguing that students completing basic education in Nigeria today are unable to read or use reading as a tool for learning, the author attributes this problem to poor teaching methodologies arising from poor teacher preparation, and teachers' faulty understanding of reading or how to teach it. The author reports that the teachers' instructional strategies went against the recommendations of a balanced reading programme because teachers neither explicitly developed learners' skills nor used research-proven best practices in teaching and assessing reading. They also did not choose materials using learner-based factors. The author recommends repositioning teacher education to empower teachers to become strategic in the teaching of reading.

The paper on the Malawi context by Sailors, Hoffman, Chilora, Kaambankadzanja, Mapondera, and Betha titled "Complementary reading material development: Successes and challenges in the Read Malawi programme", focuses on the production of reading materials for school children in Malawi. The Textbooks and Learning Materials Programme at the University of Texas at San Antonio collaborated with Malawian teachers to design and develop learning and teaching materials for Malawi schoolchildren. The collaboration team had three goals: (a) to develop learning and teaching materials focusing on language instruction for Standards 1 – 3; (b) to develop an implementation model including teacher training, school monitoring and community mobilization; and (c) to develop instruments to detail the programme's feasibility. Malawian teachers were trained to author new complementary reading materials in Chichewa and English and teach children using these materials. An extensive school and community-based support system was set-up to monitor, analyze and report the programme's effectiveness. The team reports on logistical and communication challenges, such as power-outages and delivery delays that hindered their progress. However, there were also many successes, including increased teacher self-

efficacy, decreased student absenteeism and a possible model for future programmes.

Maruatona writes about the challenges facing the delivery of quality literacy in the Southern African region from the perspective of adult learning, and argues that despite the region's commitment to the promotion of literacy, literacy facilitators are poorly remunerated and desperately need to be professionally trained. The paper, titled "An argument for the professionalization of literacy facilitators for quality education in Southern Africa", provides an overview of the policy framework for literacy facilitator training in Southern Africa. Maruatona argues that although these facilitators are the fulcrum of quality literacy, they are not considered professionals and receive little remuneration in the form of *honoraria.* In addition, they have no job security. The author discusses the need for training literacy facilitators and argues that the initial and refresher training they receive is inadequate, and is not geared towards transforming them into professionals. She further argues that this could compromise the quality of the delivery of literacy programmes. She then recommends the use of participatory training methods, the involvement of qualified and committed NGOs in facilitator training, the hiring of facilitators on contract, and the joint training of literacy facilitators and primary school teachers to optimise the use of available resources.

Ferreira-Meyers and Nkosi's paper is about using *Moodle* to develop the academic literacy of students at the University of Swaziland (UNISWA). Titled "Strengthening literacy: Academic and digital literacy in competition or in complementarity at the University of Swaziland?" the paper investigates whether *Moodle* has benefitted the students and/or the faculty members and whether students' digital competencies have increased or become more specific. The study examines exercises, forums, chat rooms, quizzes and other resources made available to students in diverse subjects, focusing in particular on language instruction (English, French, and Portuguese). The authors conclude with an overview of *Moodle*'s strengths and weaknesses.

Kolawole's paper investigates the influence of adult literacy on people's involvement in community development projects at the grassroots level in northern Nigeria. It is titled "Is literacy key to community development? Analyzing two groups of adults' involvement in development projects in northern Nigeria?" It examines the differences

in the level of involvement in community development projects by participants and non-participants in adult literacy programmes. Using a multi-stage sampling procedure, a total of 408 respondents were interviewed. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to summarize the data. Statistical analysis is used to explain the variations in the mean values of the socio-economic variables and involvement in community development activities of the respondents who participated and those who never participated in adult literacy classes. Comparing participants' income and political status before and after participation in literacy programmes, the analysis shows that at $P \leq 0.01$ level of significance, there was a significant difference in their income ($F = 11.26$) and political status ($F = 78.40$) after their participation in the literacy programmes. The paper recommends that participatory and learner-oriented literacy initiatives are necessary for a sustainable and functional adult literacy programme.

Literacy in marginalized African languages is the focus of Sibanda and Maposa's paper appropriately titled "Bold innovations at Great Zimbabwe University: The case of literacy in Zimbabwe's marginalized languages". The paper reports on the literacy campaign efforts geared at promoting indigenous Zimbabwean languages at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU). The literacy initiative is a collaborative effort between GZU and the University of Venda in South Africa. The paper argues that whereas European languages in Africa prevailed because of their prestigious status, today indigenous languages tend to be recognized on the basis of their numerical superiority and the linguistic affiliation of the ruling elite. This creates sites of struggle that re-play colonial linguistic imbalances. On the one hand, this marginalization reflects the spin-offs from the colonial era. The colonial government in Zimbabwe formulated a systematic way of excluding the black majority from the mainstream socio-economic and political activities. On the other hand, the continued marginalization of languages in post-colonial Zimbabwe reflects a tactful manipulation of indigenous languages by the black political elite for political expediency. The paper shows how this situation is being challenged and indigenous languages are being promoted in an institution of higher learning. The study is informed by the notions of Renaissance in African studies.

All the papers in this Special Issue bring together a collection of experiences drawn from different African contexts. We hope that the

reports shared in this collection of papers contribute towards ways of realizing the goal of reading and literacy for all. On behalf of the Reading Association of Botswana which hosted the 7th Pan-African Reading-for-all Conference in July 2011, we are grateful to *PULA Journal of African Studies*, for offering to publish the papers in this Special Issue.

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